

[Mysterious Vine]

[Tales?] - Tall Tales [?]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Wayne Walden

ADDRESS 51 Bank Street, New York City.

DATE November 28, 1938

SUBJECT A MYSTERIOUS VINE — "CAPTAIN" JOHNS' STORY

1. Date and time of Interview November 23, 1938
2. Place of interview Clason Point Inn
3. Name and address of informant "Captain" J. Johns Clason Point Inn, Bronx, N. Y. C.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc. (referred to in text)

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Wayne Walden

ADDRESS 51 Bank St. New York City

DATE November 28, 1938

SUBJECT A MYSTERIOUS VINE—"CAPTAIN" JOHNS' STORY

1. Ancestry

English-American

2. Place and date of birth

About 70 years of age

3. Family

Has a son who is a Captain in N. Y. Police force

4. Places lived in, with dates

Lived in Clason Point district 25 years

5. Education, with dates

Seems well-educated

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6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Was formerly a sea captain. Now the keeper of the old Clason Point Inn.

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant

Well preserved man of about 70—weighs about 175 pounds around 5 ft 8” tall—blue eyes ruddy complexion, gray eyes, rather stout—speaks fairly well—rather prejudicial in viewpoints.

10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER WAYNE WALDEN

ADDRESS 51 Bank St. New York City

DATE November 28, 1938

SUBJECT A MYSTERIOUS VINE —“CAPTAIN” JOHNS' STORY

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Captain Johns, for twenty-five years keeper of Clason Point Inn and dealer in the now antique contents of the historic old building, led me into what had once been the saloon. Presumably, he regarded me as one who might be interested in his antique wares.

“This here”, said he, is a battle-ax that Chief Geronomo used to own. Feel the handle — no one seems to know what that wood is. It ain't mahogany and it ain't any wood anybody guesses it to be.” “I ventured that it might be teak, but my guess also seemed incorrect. No. it ain't that either”, he demurred, “It seems to be a mystery just what it is. No one knows.”

The hatchet, allegedly once the property of the famous Indian Chieftain, was indeed a formidable looking weapon, and might have, when brandished by that intrepid warrior, despatched many a grave man to the happy hunting ground. But as I had no murderous inclinations, nor desire to try my hand at scalping, I made no offer to buy it. I would, however, have bought a drink at the bar of the old inn but, alas, the vast array of bottles were empty. “Those bottles”, the Captain informed me, interpreting my glance, “were all drunk up several years ago when we were running full blast.

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Sometimes, when Jimmie Walker would bring his outfit up here, we had as high as 2500 people here at one time. But when prohibition ended and Mr. La Guardia slapped on the present taxes, it—Oh, well, there is a lot of changes come over the country. I try not to be pessimistic but I guess the old times are done for.

I joined the old gentleman in a sigh as we emerged from the bar room out upon the porch where, from the East River below us, came smells as of something also dead and done for. “Come around to the back of the house, and I'll show you a part of the original structure”, the Captain said, as he led the way through the long neglected grass, succumbing to a rank growth of weeds. He showed me the original stone work of the building and pronounced it [original?], with the accent on the first syllable. “A cave is

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downbelow here”, he continued, “I was down in it once; but the monoxide gas is too strong to stay in it long enough to conduct much of a search. It is about 150 feet deep and runs out a couple of miles. There seems to be a lot of old relics of the revolutionary war and Indian relics too, I guess, but the gas won't let a person look around long.”

“Might not the cave have been used by smugglers at some time? I asked.

“Well, Commodore Vanderbilt used to live here, and they say he used to do a lot of smuggling,” the Captain answered, “and Anna Held also lived here. So did Lillian Langtree and different ones. The famous Judge Cohen used to operate here.” I surmised that neither the ladies mentioned, nor the famous Judge, were implicated in any smuggling activities, but my informant did not make it clear. This was once the Clinton H. Stevens estate, he went on, it's area is thirty-five acres.”

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We had returned to the front porch of the building, and the Captain appearing to have wearied of his information, seemed to have concluded that I was not an antique buyer after all. About to reenter the house, he paused to inspect a vine which, now withered, still clung tenaciously to the stone wall.

“Here's something that's got 'em all wondering what it is,” he said, “but no one knows much about it. It's a perennial; it dies out completely when winter comes and reappears in full force with the spring. No one knows when it started to grow here, nor why, but they say the cause of it was one of the massacres they've had here in old days.” (My informant used the expression massacree.) “The vine has four fingers and a thumb, he continued, “and uses those four fingers and thumb just like you would to climb up these rocks. Notice how it sticks to this niggerhead.” The Captain pulled some of the vine loose and bid me see for myself its fingers and thumb. I couldn't be sure that the resemblance was so remarkable, but admired nevertheless the poor plant's ability to maintain its hold upon a smooth “niggerhead” rock.

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"It don't need no water, and you don't need to give it any attention", he declared, "and if you hold one of the leaves up where the light strikes it, you'll notice blood running through it, sort of transmigrating through the veins. Sometimes, when you break off a stem, blood will ooze out of the stem. I don't know why, but as I said, it seems to be connected somehow, or be a reminder of some of those massacrees they used to have here."

The Captain again seemed disinclined to further pursue the subject. As corroboration of the "massacrees", the blood of which may still be coursing through the mysterious perennial vine, he pointed to a legend above the door and reentered the house. The legend, not too skillfully printed, reads:

"IN THE YEAR 1643 THOMAS CORNELL BOUGHT THIS POINT OF THE INDIAN HIS TITLE WAS CONFIRMED BY THE DUTCH GOVERNOR KIEFT & SETTLED HERE. PART OF THIS BUILDING IS THE ORIGINAL HOUSE CONSTRUCTED BY CORNELL. IT WAS BURNED BY THE INDIANS THE FIRST YEAR HE CAME, SOME OF HIS FAMILY KILLED, HE & HIS CATTLE DRIVEN AWAY, ANN HUTCHINSON & HER FAMILY 15 PERSONS IN ALL WERE MURDERED AT THE SAME TIME AT PELHAM BAY.

SEE RECORDS AT ALBANY N. Y."

Having read this legend, as the gesture of the Captain bade me do, I was still at a loss to account for blood flowin flowing the vine.

Staff Reporter's note:-

(I fear that this is a none too adequate contribution to folklore, but it is about all I can do with the paucity of material I was able to obtain on this visit to Clason Point.

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The Captain seems rather saturated with prejudices which I believe have no relevancy to our purpose, and I have refrained from giving expression to them. He indicates a dislike of W. P. A., and more obviously dislikes the “Jews and Eyetalians”).)